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# Reading Chaucer with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal

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### Reading Chaucer with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal

Literary critic E. T. Donaldson eloquently argues that the ending of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is paradoxical, urging people to both love this world and remain detached from it. While not disagreeing with Donaldson, I think that much can be said about Chaucer's view of the relationship between human and divine love by grappling with both the Boethian logic and the Thomistic distinctions within the poem before speaking of its paradoxical nature. Contra literary critic Gerald Morgan, one can make luminous distinctions within paradox, without privileging the former and dismissing the latter as "an unmedieval sophistication" (258). Whereas Boethius is silent on the relationship between human and divine love, Chaucer is not. He values human love positively, showing how it can be *distinct* from divine love without being *opposed* to divine love. This positive valuation is philosophically robust; it is neither a simple didactic nor a crude dialectic. Moreover, Chaucer is not a "self-deprecating ironist," as many modern critics have too readily imagined him to be, but rather a serious poet who means to communicate a profound moral truth through his "litel bok" (Morgan 258). To grasp this truth, we must read Chaucer with charity. The idea of charity, or *caritas*, refers to "the friendship of man for God," and "extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of our neighbor" (Aquinas, *ST* II-II, Q. 23 A. 1; Q. 25. A. 1). Far from being a simplistic approach, or even a Christian apologetic, the hermeneutic that I am proposing allows one to engage, I think, more faithfully with Chaucer's medieval text than an approach which would uncritically foist certain assumptions upon it, namely, the preference for ambiguity and unresolved dialectics. This hermeneutic involves discernment, unlike the "hermeneutics of suspicion," to use Paul Ricoeur's

phrase, because it does not entail pre-established conclusions about texts; it only requires that readers see authors as neighbors. Thus, a charitable read, which refers to Christian *caritas* rather than to philanthropic charity, has both its *arche* and *telos* in the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It might seem odd to suggest that readers love authors, but, realizing that the Enlightenment notion of cold, detached rationality is a fiction, the only other options are to be suspicious of or indifferent towards authors. Neither of these latter attitudes, according to literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, will “be able to generate sufficient attention to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute” (Jacobs 53). Granted, *Troilus and Criseyde* is a difficult work to understand, and any interpretation of it must be open to moral Gower’s and philosophical Strode’s correction, and, ultimately, Chaucer suggests, God’s correction, who himself is “[u]ncircumscrip[t], that al maist circumscrib[e]” (V.1865). One hopes, though, without expecting or demanding, “to find blessings and cultivate friendships; in short, to receive gifts” (Jacobs 88). By reading the last eighteen stanzas with charity, one receives such a gift—the gift of closure.

The first point to establish in arguing that Chaucer’s account of the relationship between human love and divine love is better understood by the concept of paradox than that of dialectic is that Troilus is a genuine Boethian thinker. Without a proper understanding of Boethian logic, one is likely to misinterpret Troilus’s demise, concluding that his relationship with Criseyde is in itself opposed to his relationship with the divine. Literary critic Megan Murton, drawing upon philosopher John Marenbon’s careful analysis of Boethius’s *Consolation*, shows how Troilus is, in fact, a Boethian thinker. Through Troilus’s recapitulation of the prisoner’s argument from the *Consolation*, Chaucer does not mean primarily to show Troilus’s shortcomings but rather the shortcomings of philosophy itself. A close examination of Chaucer’s translation of the

*Consolation* reveals that he, like Marenbon, is aware that Philosophy's arguments about the relationship between providence and human free will, although cogent in themselves, do not cohere. In the space of a few lines at the end of Book V, "Philosophy's long and impressive defense of human freedom is ruined [by her reaffirmation that God is the cause of all that he knows]—but she seems not to have noticed" (Marenbon 145). The most plausible explanation for this incoherence is that Boethius, in the tradition of Manippean satire, wants to show the limitations of pagan philosophy and lead readers to Christian devotion.<sup>1</sup> One would go too far, though, in arguing that Boethius ridicules philosophy only to reject it; he means, as Marenbon argues, only to explore its limitations.

Chaucer productively engages with this internal tension in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Troilus operates *within* a Boethian logic rather than *outside* of one, even when he seems to reject the Boethian narrator's turn to prayer as he rises up to the eighth sphere as a "lighte goost," damning all those who follow blind lust (V.1808). Rather than pointing out Troilus's shortcomings, Chaucer calls him a "noble knight" (V.1752), a "worthi man" (V.1766), and "he that was withouten any peere, / Save Ector" (V.1803-04). The potential problem is that Troilus reverts from praying to accepting the arguments offered by pagan Philosophy in the early parts of the *Consolation*, recognizing that the goods of this world—wealth, honor, power, fame, and pleasure—are transitory and useful only insofar as they lead one to the supreme good, which he fails to name as God. "[Troilus's] vision excludes the possibility that human love might be part of a greater divine love, or that God might answer human prayers about particular earthly concerns, or indeed that the things of heaven could intersect with earthly experience in any way" (Murton 318). Troilus's failure to maintain the prayerful posture of the Boethian narrator does

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<sup>1</sup> "Manippean satires are short works...often aimed at ridiculing pretension, especially pretensions to wisdom" (Marenbon 160).

not disqualify him as a Boethian thinker, though. His assumption of a prayerful posture in Book III shows that he is, in fact, a genuine Boethian thinker, regardless of his inability to sustain this posture. He is stopped short of the beatific vision by his situation in pre-Christian antiquity, and thus fails to maintain a positive valuation of human love. His last word on human love, however, is not to be taken as Chaucer's final word.

Furthermore, the opening lines, not just Troilus's temporal situation, guarantee his demise:

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,  
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,  
In lovyng, how his aventures fellen  
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie. (I.1-4)

According to literary critic Noel Kaylor, the double sorrow of Troilus arises from Chaucer's combination of "the Boethian pedagogical structure and the Dantesque comic / tragic system" (104). He moves from the inferno of cupidinous angst to the purgatory of expectant longing to the paradise of sexual bliss. Unlike Dante, though, Troilus does not remain at the top, or *regno*, of Fortune's wheel but, following Boethius's five-book structure, goes for two more turns to end up again at the bottom, or *sum sine regno*—hence, a double sorrow (Kaylor 98). The combination of these two structures provides for a satisfying ending to Troilus's situation, which is tragic, to be sure, but follows the capricious logic of *Rota Fortunae*. It is only then that the narrator can do what Troilus could not—lead readers to the paradoxically triune God.

Chaucer does not simply give a Boethian regurgitation, though. This is important because Boethius refrains from valuing the relationship between human love and divine love. Chaucer, however, builds upon Boethius's thought and gives a decisive answer to the relationship between human love and divine love. Although human love might lead one to divine love, Troilus, being

a pagan, can go no further than cosmic love.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Troilus's hymn in Book III is a prayer whereby he praises cosmic love and asks a deity to bind his accord with Criseyde:

Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce, / ... /  
 Love, that knetteth lawe of compaignie,  
 And couples doth in vertu for to dwelle,  
*Bynd this acord*, that I have told and telle. (III.1744-50, emphasis mine)

It is not worth focusing on the dramatic irony of their relationship—the outcome is inevitable and foreknown by readers in Book I. Murton argues, “To read the hymn in light of the story’s given ending is to rely on the rational knowledge that its claims about love will prove false, but this hymn operates in a different mode: the nonrational, but not irrational, mode of prayer” (313). What is important to recognize is that human love leads Troilus to cosmic love rather than limits his sights to earthly things. It is of little consequence for divine love that human love fails Troilus because its failure is a result of disorder, not an inherent opposition. This is to say, Chaucer’s appeal at the end of the poem—“Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte, / And of youre herte up casteth the visage / To thilke God”—is not a rejection of human love per se but of disordered human love (V.1837-39). The idea of order and its contrary is expressed in 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholasticism most notably by Thomas Aquinas, and Chaucer’s secondary source of Thomistic thought, at least for *Troilus and Criseyde*, is no doubt Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas, quoting Aristotle, writes: “Now a certain order is to be found in those things that are apprehended universally...the first indemonstrable principle is that ‘the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time’” (*ST* I-II, Q. 94, A. 2). Although the quotation is from Aquinas, not Chaucer, it reveals a medieval penchant for distinction rather than paradox. As Morgan argues, “[A] reader of the *Summa Theologiae* will not find that a taste for

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<sup>2</sup> I take “divine” love to provisionally mean love that has the Judeo-Christian God as its object and “cosmic” love to mean love that has the cosmos or even a pantheistic deity as its object.

paradox and ambiguity is at all characteristic of the thought of Aquinas. Instead he will learn that the first of the self-evident principles of the speculative intellect upon which human reasoning depends is the principle of contradiction” (258). This penchant does not undermine Chaucer’s positive valuation of human love, even though he appeals to paradox in the end, but rather reminds readers of the definition of paradox—an apparent contradiction, which need not be an actual contradiction. Chaucer uses Thomistic thought to show that human love, when properly ordered in relation to divine love, can exist in harmony with divine love. It is only when one exalts human love above the higher, cosmic love that problems begin to arise. Troilus’s sorrow and disillusionment result from “a *total* commitment to the goods of a transient world” (Morgan 265, emphasis mine). Through the idea of distinction, Chaucer can both affirm human love and implore readers to turn their visages heavenward, which, admittedly, can seem paradoxical at times. “[T]he subject of Chaucer’s romance[, though,] is exactly what the narrator states in the opening stanza: the ‘aventures in lovyng’ of the protagonist” (Kaylor 104). The tragedy results from exalting human love above divine love.

Before considering the authenticity of Chaucer’s religious appeal, I wish to counter a reading of the poem’s last stanzas that threatens to undermine the claim that the relationship between human and divine love is best understood within a Boethian/Thomistic framework.<sup>3</sup> Literary critic Clíodhna Carney argues that Chaucer wishes to preserve the truth about ordered loves through the Neoplatonic scheme of *exitus* and *reditus*, which she finds in the lines, “Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye, / Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye, / So send myght to make in some comedye!” (Carney 357, Chaucer 1786-88). She argues that the truth has gone out, and the narrator-maker tells the “litel book” to return to its divine source, God. By claiming that

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<sup>3</sup> I join the two together here because, in some ways, Aquinas extends ideas of Boethius (*ST* I-II, Q. 2; Q. 4, A. 8).

the “litel bok” originated in or emanated from God, the narrator (Carney argues) suggests that his poem has been divinely inspired; by telling it to return to God, he assures readers, or perhaps himself, that it will be preserved through the passage of time. Although this Neoplatonic scheme, originally developed by Plotinus, is not at odds with Thomistic thought—the Plotinian chain of being is a prominent feature in Aquinas’s works—Chaucer is not alluding to that scheme in this famous stanza. Carney’s sophisticated misinterpretation rests on a grammatical misreading. She takes the appositive “thi makere yet” to refer to God, which would make the poem an infallible work (V.1787). However, the narrator, not God, is the proper referent. In telling the “litel bok” to go to God, the narrator hopes that God will give him the “myght to make [the poem] in som comedye!” (V.1786-87). Therefore, Chaucer is not referring to a Plotinian scheme but to a line of authorship. In lieu of a Greek formula of the divine, he invokes a Trinitarian formula—the same one that Dante uses in his *Paradiso*—which is what provides the poem’s closure (Wheeler 120).

Although the suggestion of divine inspiration might be misguided, Chaucer’s use of Thomistic thought signals “the end altogether of a tragic outlook on the facts of embodiment on this earth, and a move towards an encompassing logic, where all the forms of human living are explored,” not, as Carney argues, “for their own sake,” but rather for their relation to the divine order (Carney 367). The tragedy of Troilus and Criseyde has the potential to become the comedy of readers if only they cast up their visages to God and order their lives with respect to him as the one supreme good (V.1786-88). Some might think it odd to call Criseyde’s outcome tragic, but, within a Boethian framework, it is. Their tragedy is not inevitable, though. Of course, in one sense, it is because of readerly prescience, but, in another, it is not and arises from the mutual disordering of their love in relation to God.



With all this talk of Troilus, what of Criseyde? She, too, comes to realize the sorrow of pursuing “thise wrecched worldes appetites” (V.1851). What follows is a consideration of two accounts from Chaucerian scholarship of how readers might understand Criseyde; this consideration is given for the purpose of advancing the argument that human love is not, per se, opposed to divine love. The first account comes from literary critic Laura Howes, who claims that the helpless victim/calculating woman binary through which Criseyde is often analyzed is an unhelpful one. Readers should, Howes argues, view Criseyde as one who is engaged in the performance of two normative roles—the romantic heroine and the obedient woman (or daughter/niece). As the former, she should elope (or, along with Troilus, kill herself), and as the latter, she should obey her father, Pandarus, and perhaps even Diomedes. Does she betray Troilus? Yes. And, in literary critic Jelena Marelj’s “ethical evaluation of [Criseyde’s] agency within a Boethian framework that privileges realist metaphysics,” she is seen to an ethical nominalist, which is an undesirable signifier of moral opprobrium (Marelj 207). But she herself is betrayed by most of the men in her life: Calchas leaves her, Hector fails to defend her in the Trojan parliament, and Pandarus does nothing to prevent her exchange. In the end, literary critic Jenny Lee argues, “[a]lthough Troilus is at least partially redeemed...with his shift in perspective while Criseyde is still mired on earth, lacking a third eye, both ultimately come to recognize their fallen state,” which echoes the sentiment of another voice in another poem by Chaucer, “Trouthe”: “The wrastling for this world axeth a fal” (63). Therein lies the tragedy of Criseyde.

Clearly, a tension exists between Criseyde’s roles of romantic heroine and obedient woman. These roles are constructs, though—they are not essential to Criseyde, as if set in some eternal, dialectical opposition to one another. Therefore, although we could subject Criseyde—as an (un)romantic heroine and (dis)obedient woman—to an ethical evaluation using a

Boethian/Thomistic framework, we need not do so. We need only to point out the performative rather than essential nature of her gender to show that a negative ethical evaluation, whether by us or by the narrator, does not undermine a positive relationship between human and divine love. It is both Criseyde's and Troilus's performances of certain roles, as well as their exaltation of love for one another above love of the divine, that produce the tension between human and divine love. The tension between the two is not inherent, and, one imagines, could be resolved if Troilus and Criseyde acted differently. This is not to say that moral censure of Criseyde is warranted; there are a range of opinions in the literature and it is not the focus of this paper to contribute to that conversation. Returning to the idea of reading Chaucer with charity, though, one could argue for either a positive or a negative ethical evaluation of Criseyde, the narrator, or Chaucer himself, and do so with charity, which begins with attentiveness, not critique. Charity can, and often must, involve critique, but such critique is only warranted after one has first listened to an author. Readers who take this approach resist both stopping up their ears and stoning authors, and, alternatively, making authors out to be suspiciously modern.

Lastly, we turn to the question of whether or not Chaucer the narrator is a self-deprecating ironist. Modern readers might think it trite to end the poem with a sincere religious appeal, but this a modern sentiment, not a medieval one. Given Chaucer's situation in Christendom, I propose that we assume his sincerity unless definite proof to the contrary can be shown. In Boethian and Thomistic thought, the move from philosophy to Christianity—a higher consolation—and the move to properly order human love in relation to divine love is both satisfying and consoling. To argue otherwise is not to argue from the text but rather from one's own religious convictions, or, to use the sociologist Peter Berger's term, one's own plausibility structures. A charitable interpretation recognizes and appreciates the inner logic of the text,

regardless of whether or not one agree with it. The same that is true of Christ is true of Chaucer within the poem: “For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye, / That wol his herte al holly on hym leye” (V.1845-46). Moreover, Chaucer directs his book to “moral Gower,” a fellow poet, and “philosophical Strode,” a Thomist philosopher, charging them to warrant, or justify, the poem’s sophisticated philosophical reasonings and to correct readers’ misinterpretations if they arise (V.1856-57).

At least two objections can be raised to the conclusion that the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* is satisfying. The first, less serious objection is that the poem does not end in a satisfactory way because its underlying thought structures are not readily accessible. However, seeing its *prima facie* move from philosophical insight to religious devotion seems to provide for a sufficient understanding, even if one cannot give a full account of Chaucer’s deft literary employments. The second, more serious objection is that human love does not lead Troilus to divine love. He approaches the divine in Book III through petitionary prayer, expressing some kind of cosmic love, but, by the end of Book V, he assumes a *contemptus mundi* topos. If, in reply, one was to answer that the Chaucerian narrator, not Troilus, has the last word, the difficulty would still remain, for the narrator himself seems to assume this topos. Speaking of Christ, the narrator asks, “And syn he best to love is, and most meke, / What nedeth feynede loves for seke?” (V.1847-48). A negative answer risks setting human love and divine love in opposition to one another, eliminating the possibility of ordering them in proper relation to one another. As literary critic Bonnie Wheeler argues, “The meaning of this ending...hangs here more than anything else on our decisions about one word: ‘feynede’” (115). If it means “pretended” love, then it does not necessarily follow that authentic human love hinders love of the divine. If, on the other hand, it means “that all human loves, in their necessary

impermanence, are ‘feynede,’” then a negative response would deny human love any value, including Troilus and Criseyde’s love for one another (115). Wheeler’s answer to this objection is that “the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde* is a full poetic resolution through theological paradox” (118). In the final ten lines of the poem, the narrator offers a distinctly Christian, Trinitarian prayer wherein he recognizes the mystery of both the human and the divine. “[I]n the end even ‘feynede loves’ are affirmed by the poem’s final appeal to Christ’s love for his mother” (119). Thus, the *contemptus mundi* theme is not absolute, meaning that, although it might be difficult to properly order human love and divine love, they are not necessarily opposed to one another. As Murton has shown, human love can even lead to divine love.

Given the complexities, or, we might say, mysteries, of human existence, this paradox provides closure. As novelist Iris Murdoch writes, “Coherence is not necessarily good, and one must question its cost. Better sometimes to remain confused” (Jacobs 147). Like the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith, such as the Trinity, our relationships with one another are not easily described. This is not a problem for charitable readers, for they do not need Chaucer to fit some type. They are free to listen to him, hoping for and, I think, receiving the gift of closure in paradox. Finally, although they, in their human frailty, see the narrator and his characters through a glass darkly, Chaucer comforts them with the truth that God alone, “who is uncircumscrip,” interprets infallibly (V.1865). Thus Chaucer, by appealing to grace rather than judgment, refuses to give human love a negative valuation, thereby enabling charitable readers to fulfill both the second and the greatest commandment.

## Works Cited

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *New Advent*. Web.

Aquinas argues that charity is friendship with God and with man. I use two relevant passages from his *Summa* (*ST* II-II, Q. 23 A. 1; Q. 25. A. 1) to construct my proposal to read Chaucer with charity.

Carney, Clíodhna. "Chaucer's 'litel Bok', Plotinus, and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Neophilologus* 93.2 (2008): 357-68. Web.

Carney argues that the Neoplatonic scheme of *exitus* and *reditus*—emanation and return-to-source—influence the imaginary and language of the poem, and that Chaucer invokes a Plotinian conception of the divine. I counter her argument in preparation for my own argument that he uses a Trinitarian formula.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "Troilus and Criseyde." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry Dean Benson. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford U, 2008. 473-585. Print.

Donaldson, E. T. "The Ending of Chaucer's *Troilus*." *Speaking of Chaucer*. New York: Norton, 1970. 84-101. Print.

Donaldson's reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* is a prominent one in Chaucerian scholarship. Several of the cited authors—Wheeler, Morgan, Marelj, and Howes—engage with his position. He argues that the poem states, paradoxically, that people must both love and hate this world.

Howes, Laura L. "Chaucer's Criseyde: The Betrayer Betrayed." *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*. By Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson. Prior. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame, 2005. 324-43. Print.

Rather than viewing Criseyde as either a helpless victim or a calculating woman, Howes argues that we should view her as someone who is expected to perform two normative roles—the romantic heroine and the obedient woman. I use Howes' insight to make a tentative suggestion about how we can understand Criseyde in a Boethian/Thomistic framework.

Jacobs, Alan. *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001. Print.

I originally constructed my hermeneutics of charity from passages in Aquinas's *Summa*. However, upon revision of my paper, I have drawn upon Jacobs's work, wherein he develops a hermeneutics of love based primarily upon the writings of Augustine and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Kaylor, Noel Harold, Jr. "The Shape of Chaucerian Tragedy." *Pe Laurer of Oure Englishe Tonge*. Ed. Marcin Krygier and Liliana Sikorska. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009. 93-105. Print.

Kaylor shows how Chaucer combines a Boethian pedagogical structure with a Dantesque system of comedy / tragedy to produce something new. I pull from her work in my paper when I argue that Troilus is a genuine Boethian thinker *even though* he fails to reach the beatific vision.

Lee, Jenny. "'Of Your Herte Up Casteth the Visage': Turning Troilo/Troilus's Eyes to God." *Hortulus* 3 (2007): 41-66. Web.

Lee examines how the lover's gaze functions in both Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* and in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. I use her work to argue that Criseyde is a tragic figure just like Troilus.

Marelj, Jelena. "The Philosophical Entente of Particulars: Criseyde as Nominalist in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde." *The Chaucer Review* 47.2 (2012): 206-21. Web.

Marelj argues that Criseyde is an ethical nominalist who operates within a poem that privileges realist metaphysics. She provides a useful way for thinking about Criseyde, but I ultimately group her work with others as foils to Laura L. Howes work.

Marenbon, John. *Boethius*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

Marenbon argues that Philosophy's arguments for the harmony of providence and human free will, although cogent in themselves, do not cohere, and this is what Boethius, in the tradition of Manippean satire, intended. I use Marenbon's work mainly to understand Megan Murton's article, but also to argue that Troilus is a genuine Boethian thinker.

Morgan, Gerald. "The Ending of "Troilus and Criseyde"" *The Modern Language Review* 77.2 (1982): 257-71. Web.

Morgan argues that Chaucer, pulling from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, uses the Aristotelian, or Thomistic, idea of order to show that the relationship between divine love and human love is better understood through distinction than paradox. I accept Morgan's argument about Thomistic distinctions with *T&C*, but reject the opposition that he creates between distinction and paradox.

Murton, Megan. "Praying with Boethius in Troilus and Criseyde." *The Chaucer Review* 49.3 (2015): 294-319. Web.

Murton gives a reevaluation of Chaucer's Boethianism in light of John Marenbon's work on the *Consolation*. She does not reference Aquinas, but she does argue that Chaucer gives human love a positive valuation through the idea of distinction. In effect, she provides a synthesis of Boethian and Thomistic thought, ultimately concluding that

Troilus is a genuine Boethian thinker. For my paper, I attempt to put her in conversation with Gerald Morgan, and show the medieval penchant for distinction rather than the modern one for dialectic.

Wheeler, Bonnie. "Dante, Chaucer, and the Ending of Troilus and Criseyde." *Philological Quarterly* 61 (1982): 105-23. Print.

Wheeler gives a close reading of Chaucer's poem in light of Dante's *Paradiso*. Her work proved to be invaluable for a revision of my paper, as it helped me to see that what I am contesting is not paradox but both a hermeneutics of suspicion and the modern preference for unresolved dialectics.